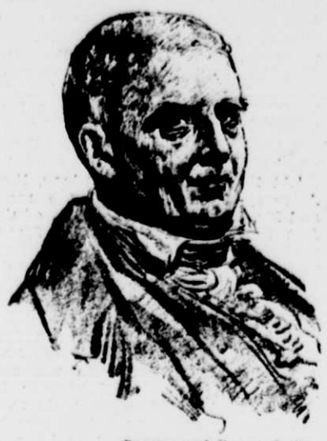
FRAGONARD'S FAMOUS DU BARRY PANELS

Historic Paintings Intended for Pavilion at Louveciennes Will Adorn Walls of Henry C. Frick's Fifth Avenue Home

The famous Du Barry panels by Fragonard have been sold by J. Pierpont Morgan and are now the property of Henry C. Frick. They will henceforth be in the first floor drawing room of Mr. Frick's new house at Fifth avenue and Seventieth street.



Courtesy of Braun & Co
Fragonard.

By CHRISTIAN BRINTON.

NOWHERE and at no period has art reflected life with such intimate joy as in France during the eighteenth century. The accord between that which was and its transcription in pigment or marble, in colored chalk or terra cotta here touched a perfection never approached before or since. The appealing falsities of Lancret and Pater, of Clodion or Bouchardon belied not the life, the manners and modes of that particular moment but merely life itself. They were incomparably true to existent conditions, to that rose and white convention which was not to be shattered until the red dawn of the Revolution.

In this art there were no hints of pain or sorrow; a playful, feverish reversion to pleasure was the only note sounded.

The chosen poet of all this radiant perversion, the one who caught best its spirit and its accent, was not Watteau, so tinged with pensiveness, nor Boucher, who had every gift save the gift of truth, but Fragonard. Throughout his life Fragonard played and perpetuated the comedy of love. It was he who reduced the pervading tissue of myth to its most definite terms, he who revived with multiple nuances so many lost kisses and neglected caresses. Femininity, perverse and disquieting, he glorified with delicate precision on fans, in miniature, portraits and decorative panels.

Born at Grasse, famed for its flowers and its perfumes—Grasse framed about by a silver green fringe of olive trees with, beyond, the blue rim of the sea—Fragonard came early to Paris. He came, it appears, on foot, in company with Gerard pere, whose daughters were one day so to illumine his life.

Though he already longed to become a painter, the boy was first placed with a notary, where he did little save scribble caricatures. He soon went to Boucher, was refused, then to Chardin, and, after a year's study, again to Boucher. On returning to the "Peintre des Graces et des Amours" he brought a handful of drawings which insured him the desired welcome.

They were sketches made at odd moments in the great churches of Paris, where hung canvases solemn and full of inspiration, which beckoned the young spirit toward a world very different to that which he afterward conquered with such transcendent hability. From now until 1752, when, at the age of 20, he won the Prix de Rome over Saint-Aubin, Fragonard came more and more under the spell of Boucher, whose nymphs, Dianas and Auroras fluttered on every wall and ceiling, bathed in rose tinted vapor, false and captivating.

The years in Rome, five in all, under Natoire at the Academy, or passed with Saint-Non, amateur etcher, engraver and abbe, held unmeasured richness for Fragonard. At first overwhelmed by Raphael and Michelangelo, just as Regnault was, and even Goethe, he quickly found his level among minor painters such as Tiepolo, Solimena, Baroccio and Pietro da Cortona.

Early in 1770 Fragonard, through the good offices of Drouais, was engaged to paint four dessus de porte for the Du Barry Pavilion at Louveciennes, near Marly. The radiant freshness of these little panels so caught the favorite's fancy that a year later, when the new pavilion approached completion, Fragonard was commissioned to execute four large panels for the main salon, the subjects, it seems, having been suggested by Mme. du Barry herself.

All the chief artists of the day were united to make this structure the consummation of taste and elegance. Ledoux was chosen architect, Lecomte, Pajou, Vasse and Allegrain contributed the sculpture, and Drouais and Vernet the paintings. There were time pieces by Lepaute, brasses by Gouthiere, tapestries by Cozette, and from the gilded wainscoting glanced Greuse's demurely sentimental "Broken Pitcher."

It was in the four panels dedicated to this temple of beauty and license that Fragonard achieved the cardinal triumph of his career. Yet these panels, fitting as they seem, never took their place on the walls of the salon for which they were destined. The reason was not because Mme. du Barry lacked funds to pay for them or because Vien's lubricous classicism was deemed more appropriate, but because the artist had been a shade too explicit in the matter of portraiture.

Louis XV. resented being pictured, even as a young and fanciful shepherd, in company with the favorite. The royal sybarite refused to sanction any record of his profligacy, and Fragonard's idyl, which traced in such persuasive accents the love of king and courtesan, was supplanted by decorations in no way comparable to this dream of youthful tenderness.

Devant Le Peintre

Catch phrases of liberty and freedom had already penetrated the studios. Early in September, 1789, Mme. Fragonard and a younger sister, Marguerite Gerard, were among those to offer the Assembly their tribute of rings, bracelets and jewels of every sort for the national defence.

Although his friends fared badly, and his pension was reduced, Fragonard continued to enjoy the protection of David, who was all powerful and who made him member of the "Jury des Arts" and "President du Conservatoire." He even figured in the place of honor at the planting of a "Tree of Liberty" in the gardens of the museum.

Still, the little man, "petit papa Fragonard," as they came to call him, was shaken in spirit and filled with dismay by the scenes of bloodshed and terror, the red handed Communists and drunken soldiers who lurched past him on the streets. Life might, after all, be more secure, less uncertain, at Grasse; so early in 1794 the timid "President du Conservatoire" slipped away unnoted, taking with him the long neglected panels.

Here at Grasse, Grasse framed about by its silver green fringe of olive trees, with, beyond, the sparkling rim of the sea, Fragonard passed the ruthless days of the Terror. It was here, in the quiet, cypress screened mansion of his friends the Mauberts that the "Roman d'Amour de la Jeunesse" found at last its true setting, a setting more enduring than it would ever have known at Louveciennes. During those days when Paris streets ran with blood, when the catastrophe had indeed come, "le petit papa Fragonard" dreamed again his dream of youthful tenderness—dreamed and realized.

In the large salon on the lower floor, with windows looking out upon the garden where pomegranates, orange trees, purple hollyhocks and great masses of geraniums shimmered in the sunlight, Fragonard completed, harmonized and fused into one appealing series his engaging love pastoral. In size and disposition the room was admirably suited to receive the four panels already finished. To these he added a fifth and painted four dessus de porte, a panel above the mantel, and four connecting shafts.

Much ingenuity and much fatuity have been expended in attempts to establish both the chronology and the nomenclature of these panels. From M. Lagrange to M. Virgile Josz each successive writer has named them differently, and has suggested a different order.

There seems, however, to be scant doubt that the earliest in date are the four panels undertaken at Mme. du Barry's request, all of which are in the painter's early or bleuatre manner, which is best exemplified by "L'Escarpolette," now in the Wallace collection. The others, including the fifth large panel, are in Fragonard's later or blond manner, and, judging from the closer study of purely local tree and flower forms which they all witness, were evidently painted at Grasse.

Touching the question of appropriate names for the earlier and larger compositions, as well as the matter of order, Claude Phillips takes issue with Baron Portalis and alters the arrangement of the two first panels, placing, wisely, "La Poursuite" before "Le Rendez-vous," and making the series run "La Poursuite," "La Rendez-vous," "Les Souvenirs" and "L'Amant Couronne." In placing the single panel last and calling it "L'Abandon" both Baron Portalis and Mr. Phillips seem to have sacrificed a subtler and perhaps more concise interpretation of this love comedy.

Closer subjective and objective analyses might have indicated that this canvas depicts "L'Attente," not "L'Abandon"; and that it was intended as a prologue, not an epilogue. The expression of the cupid who surmounts the pedestal and the attitude of the female figure, with its hint of expectancy and longing and the loose hanging hair, bespeak not the twilight but the dawn of love.

The picture was, moreover, originally known as "La Vierge et l'Amour," a sufficient implication that it could not form the closing note of the series. Finally, eighteenth century art recorded love in all its audacious actuality, caring naught for the abandoned, for the debris of love.

Nothing in the art of Fragonard nor in the art of his day in anywise approaches the beauty and the lyric charm of this love poem. The slender thread of sequence is preserved in duplicate, the dessus de porte carrying along the story symbolically, the main panels giving more definite versions of the theme. It is Olympus and the Earth—a playful Olympus with a chubby deity chasing doves and cabrioling about the air, and an Earth profusely flowered and peopled by a young couple clad in fancy shepherd costume, their every movement cadenced by the pulse of love.

The youth of twenty who offers the rose, who climbs to the terrace where the chosen one awaits, who is tender and triumphant, is, of course, Louis XV., minus nearly half a century of self-indulgence. The slender blonde who accepts with such inviting reserve, such studied artlessness, is Mme. du Barry, whose white throat was soon to be severed by the guillotine. In at least two of the panels both portraits are sufficiently accurate, while in the concluding panel it is permissible to suppose that the young painter who has been called upon to immortalize the episode is a casual likeness of Fragonard himself, his dark curls and clear cut features having already been seen in "L'Armoire" and other canvases.

For over a century Fragonard's Comedy of Love remained quite as he had left it in this silent room with its Beauvais tapestries, gilt consoles, couches and tabourets—this room so filled with the fragrance of past faded elegance. It was not, indeed, until February 1, 1898, that the paintings passed from the family of M. Malvilat, a grandson of the painter's friend, M. Maubert, on which date they were sold at auction at Cannes, bringing 1,250,000 francs. During the autumn of the same year they were exhibited in London at the rooms of Messrs. Agnew & Son, Old Bond street, and were later purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan.

Before he had even added certain lingering touches to his love idyl, Fragonard returned to Paris, reassured by the fall of Robespierre. Though the storm was now over, the Paris which greeted him was not the Paris of former days. Wealthy fermiers-generaux and nymphes d'opera were scattered, the Loves and Graces had fled, beauty had been stamped underfoot. The streets still swarmed with soldiers, beggars, thieves and wild eyed hags.

No one knew the little man with short gray locks, black mantle and white scarf loosely knotted who dodged about in search of some friend who might drop him a word of welcome. The insufferable classicism of David and his school was at its apogee, Fanfan was already becoming Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard, distinguished and uninspired as painter or sculptor, and Marguerite Gerard exhibited at the Salon vapid little reminiscences which could hardly have brought her master joy. All seemed strange and hopeless. Cherubino was forgotten; he belonged to another, a brighter age. Moreover, the brushes had lost their magic; there remained on the palette no glittering dust from butterfly wings.

They were bitter days for one who had tasted nothing but life's happiness. Not only was his pension withheld, not only did Marguerite Gerard respond in pretty platitudes to his appeals for aid, but one night Napoleon, who came riding by with Duroc, ordered his "immediate removal" from the Louvre, fearing the little fellow's modest taper might imperil paintings and statuary sacked from every corner of Europe.

He then moved across to the Palais-Royal, lodging with Veri, a restaurant keeper, and spent his days pattering about the streets and gardens. On certain of these wanderings he perhaps chanced upon stray engravings by De Launay of canvasses which he must have recalled with confused, pathetic rapture. One afternoon—it was just as the troops were swinging home from Austerlitz—he returned tired and feverish, and called for an ice; it brought on cerebral congestion, and before dawn he was dead.

His whole life, save those few troubled years toward the last, had been a "Roman d'Amour de la Jeunesse," expressed in delicate variants on the blues, the whites and reds of his own radiant Grasse. Though he touched with gracious, flexible charm many themes, yet love was his chosen theme, love which he pressed into the petals of a rose, a rose worn now at the breast, now offered in mystic virgin sacrifice, now lying crushed upon the floor.

History of the Series of Love Pastorals Rejected by Louis XV. and the Artist's Tragic End

La Poursuite

Rêverie

La Lecture